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On May 16, 2008, EASO's Task Force on Prevention and Public Health convened in Geneva Switzerland, after several years of low activity. New members were assembled for the first time and made plans to meet on a regular basis. The main purpose of this meeting was to agree on priorities and appropriate milestones to be achieved over the next years. Among other things, it was decided that the task force's first task would be to introduce ourselves and our mission to the readership of OBESITY FACTS.

Background

This document is signed by all members of the task force, who will contribute knowledge on the problem of obesity in the various regions of Europe. It is apparent from the wide range of available prevalence estimates that the magnitude of the obesity epidemic varies across Europe. However certain similarities are present, including consistent but varying increases in prevalence in all countries from the end of the 20th century to the present, together with clear inverse socioeconomic gradients. The lack of harmonized surveillance efforts across Europe makes international monitoring and comparative assessments imprecise at best. A particularly worrisome aspect of this epidemic is the recently observed increase in the proportion of European children with overweight and obesity. The Task Force is in agreement that the epidemic reflects changing lifestyles and environments and that prevention can only be achieved by identifying and arresting these trends, a statement that has been repeated by many groups advocating obesity prevention over the years.

For instance, in 1999 the Milan Declaration was made on behalf of all members of the EASO, resolving to support the development of coherent national and Europe-wide strategies for the prevention and management of overweight and obesity. Since then, there have been recent steps to develop a public health strategy for obesity prevention across Europe, including most notably the 2006 European Ministerial Conference on Counteracting Obesity in the European Region. At that time, all member states of WHO Europe met in Istanbul and explicitly agreed on an ecological approach to fighting the obesity epidemic, with a charter recognizing that counteracting obesity requires a multidisciplinary effort with a timeline for improvements (www.euro.who.int/document/E89567.pdf).

In this context, the vision of our Task Force is to provide guidance and leadership to researchers, governments, and agencies that are trying to fulfill the charter developed in Istanbul and other recent initiatives. Specifically, we will support and strengthen research and interventions to improve prevention of obesity across Europe, within the framework of the EASO.

Missions of the Task Force

Over the next years the Task Force has defined several overriding objectives, many of which are detailed in the joint response of the International Obesity Task Force and EASO to the Commission of the European Communities Green Paper Promoting Healthy Diets and Physical Activity; a European dimension for the prevention of overweight, obesity, and chronic diseases. Many of these issues are raised in the subsequent White Paper on a European Strategy on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity Related Health Issues: http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/nutrition/documents/nutrition_wp_en.pdf.

Our objectives and selected examples of activities may be summarized below:

- To build an active expert group on the prevention of obesity in Europe working with support from EASO.
- To facilitate networking and meeting opportunities on issues related to public health and prevention of obesity in Europe including for instance support of satellite meetings on prevention at European conferences. Additionally, we aim to coordinate our work on obesity with other European groups engaged in diet and physical activity monitoring and related health promotion activities.

- To promote research on issues related to prevention of obesity in Europe including support of various types of research ranging from individual community based intervention projects to systematic analysis of interventions including also environmental modifications, pricing policies, etc. Developing and supporting uniform monitoring systems for assessment of prevalence, incidence and economic aspects of obesity in Europe will also be an area of priority.
- To support and disseminate effective strategies, programs, approaches, and other examples of good practice for the prevention of obesity in Europe, including a central bank of information on what is happening in the field of obesity prevention and on standards to improve comparability across countries. For instance, we will initiate a project to map prevention activities across Europe, which could potentially be built into the newly created home page of the Task Force (www.easo.org/working_groups_prevention.htm).

Concluding Statement

The group is preparing for full activity and hopes to be able to support European obesity prevention activities in various settings. We look forward to hearing about interests and activities of our European colleagues and in particular your individual contributions to our planned mapping of European prevention activities. Please contact us for discussions on how to achieve our common visions, or contact Euan Woodward at the EASO Secretariat (ewoodward@iaso.org).

Signatories

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